

## **“Sideways” Feminism: Rebecca West and the *Saturday Evening Post*, 1928**

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Military leaders and progressives move forwards; cowards and conservatives move backwards. Who or what moves sideways? Only sinister creatures—snakes and spiders, things that slither or creep—and, according to Rebecca West, some women. Her 1928 short story “Sideways” was an unexpected celebration of one such character, who not only turned a suspect approach to life into a virtue, but made other women around her feel as though “one was only allowed to move diagonally, but that one was winning gloriously” by doing so (West, “Sideways” 10). In fact, it was West herself who was “winning gloriously,” selling this story to one of the most powerful, highest-paying publishing houses in the English-speaking world and beginning a profitable, if uneasy, relationship with it that would continue into the 1930s. At the same time, she was winning in another way; she was making this story her successful testing-ground. Here, West, an innovative British modernist, used an American middlebrow weekly to explore a new kind of feminist protagonist who did not, at first sight, look feminist at all, but who would become the prototype of a long line of heroines for her later works—women who preserved the lives of the innocent through lies, evasion, and indirection.

If this was a personal and professional victory for West, so the publication of this story also represented an important “sideways” movement on a larger scale. Her British contemporaries watched with great interest, as an experimental woman writer with progressive political sympathies and aesthetic principles swerved into the territory of the transatlantic middlebrow market and demonstrated that this market could, if approached properly—that is, “diagonally”—open itself to an unlikely outside force. The success that West enjoyed in making this turn toward a different kind of readership predicted, if not invited, the kind of association with popular fiction that Virginia Woolf would forge a few years later through *Flush* (1933), her feminist tract masquerading as the biography of a historical

pet—a work, as Pamela L. Caughie reminds us, that was conceived of as both a “profit-making enterprise” and a radical “literary exercise,” and that became a Book-of-the-Month Club hit in the U. S. (53). Like “Sideways,” *Flush* used comedy to bridge this divide. Woolf’s novel was, nonetheless, far more overt politically than West’s story in its attack on the patriarchal family and in its support of women’s resistance, although it couched these in terms of the Victorian past.

“Sideways” accomplished its feminist ends through covert tactics, even as it held up for admiration a contemporary (rather than a safely nineteenth-century) heroine who embodied the principles of deception and duplicity as life-saving necessities for women. Rebecca West had cut her teeth in the pre-World-War-I world of British suffrage activism—a world far from the conservative one of most American middlebrow readers of late-1920s popular fiction, who would have been repelled by such militancy. In crafting a story such as “Sideways,” however, West did more than merely reach out sympathetically to those who did their feminist work quietly and in secret by going around obstacles, rather than through them. She found a way to cross over into the more conventional mode of mass-market magazine storytelling, while laughing up her sleeve at the powerful male publishing magnates who set the standards for the genre, both politically and aesthetically; she helped to pioneer for her modernist contemporaries the oxymoronic category of subversive feminist middlebrow fiction

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As my topic involves sideways movement, I will enter it aslant, through a portrait of Rebecca West painted by one of her British literary contemporaries, Sewell Stokes. Writing about him in a 1928 letter to Noël Coward, West described Stokes as “a lad” who had “blown into my house” and had “frequently been my guest,” but who was untrustworthy and “malicious” (West, *Letters* 108). Although West sometimes may have been guilty of taking offense too readily, she was in this case justified in believing that Stokes had treated her badly. Born Francis Martin Sewell Stokes in 1902—and later a novelist, dramatist, and biographer, whose greatest success was the play *Oscar Wilde* (1936), co-written with his brother Leslie, along with the 1960 film that it inspired—he first made his name through his friendships with famous women, especially by issuing the memoir *Isadora Duncan: An Intimate Portrait* (1928), which appeared soon after her death. Also in 1928 he produced *Pilloried!*, a volume of witty profiles—sometimes tart and occasionally sentimental—of famous acquaintances ranging from Ronald Firbank and Dame Ellen Terry to Sinclair Lewis and the Sitwells. The use of an exclamation point in the title foreshadowed the book’s claim to offer daring, if not scandalous, revelations about celebrities from the world of the arts.

Chapter Two of *Pilloried!*, titled "Gossipry," was given over entirely to an appreciation of Rebecca West, a tribute tempered throughout, however, by bitchiness and marred by what West called distortions of her own words. Stokes's introductory remarks captured perfectly his mixture of attitudes toward her:

Before we meet this celebrated lady—for once we have done so she will allow us small opportunity of doing anything but listen to her—I will endeavour to explain her celebrity, which is not, at first, easily understood. For she is more popular, particularly as a personality, than authors who have written as well, and three times as much, as she has done. And her name is known even by people who could not tell you who she is, what she has written, or if she writes at all; which, I think, is a substantial proof of fame. (Stokes 11–12)

While complimenting her upon her "lovely dark head" (10), her youthful appearance—"with that slight, easy swing of hers, she looked no more than nineteen years old" (13)—and her ability to "fill even a large room on entering it, fill it as a ray of dazzling electric light or a breath of expensively scented air" (12), Stokes also observed cattily that "people from Sutton" (meaning middle-class suburbanites, rather than bohemians like himself) "seeing her for the first time, might say she looked 'actressy'" (13). In the chapter that followed, he continued to pursue this theme of West as both a brilliant presence and as a woman too theatrical, too obviously a performer, and always too insistent upon taking center stage in every social situation. "Talking to Rebecca West," as he confided to his readers, "is like being the supporting character in a duologue by Wilde. One has to 'play up' to the lead all the time, and 'playing up' to Rebecca West is no easy matter" (17).

At the conclusion of the chapter on West, however, Sewell Stokes staged an imaginary scene of his own, occasioned by what he recognized as the financial necessity lying behind much of her writing in the Twenties, especially her fugitive pieces for newspapers and magazines. It was not, he suggested, that the superficial character of her contributions meant that she herself was "trivial"; rather, the periodicals demanded triviality, and they paid her well for it: "The subjects on which she has to write! You know the kind of thing: 'Are There Too Many Attractive Men?' 'What Life Means to Me'; 'The Truth about the Modern Girl'" (italics in original; 22). He ended, therefore, with a comic mini-scenario intended to account for this evident waste of West's literary talent:

Often reading her articles, I could weep, picturing to myself the tragic little West behind them—a pitiful figure seated at her desk.

In walks her secretary:

‘The *Express* on the phone, Miss West—  
can you do them a thousand words on “Are Boys  
Girls?” at a guinea a word?’ (22–23)

Acid though his tone may have been, Sewell Stokes had in fact put his finger on something real. Much of West’s writing in this period was occasioned by her status as a single mother and thus by her need to support both herself and her illegitimate son Anthony, despite the financial assistance that his father, the writer H. G. Wells, also provided—assistance that did not increase substantially until after the death of Wells’s wife in 1927 (Glendinning 115). To be able not merely to eat well but to dress beautifully and to travel, which West considered necessities, rather than luxuries, required lots of money. After all, the conversations with her that Stokes allegedly reproduced—or, as she claimed, deliberately misrepresented—took place on the Côte d’Azur in Antibes, the expensive resort town where she liked to go on holiday. As West would have the breathy-voiced, American-born heroine of her story “Sideways” announce, in a rare burst of candor, “A girl’s gotta be rich. A girl can’t have a really good time and be safe if she isn’t rich” (“Sideways” 78). To be financially safe, however, “a girl” (or in West’s case, a mature woman of thirty-six) had to turn to powerful men and to the institutions that they ran, such as newspapers and magazines, even if that meant taking the risk of compromising her integrity—whether sexually or, in West’s particular case, intellectually and ideologically.

In the 1920s, the chief source of potential riches lay across the Atlantic. Reporting in 1923 on her first visit to Philadelphia, Rebecca West wrote at length to her sister Winifred about what was then the center of journalistic power and profit in the United States: “an incredible palace of marble and red brick” that housed “the largest magazine company in the world,” the Curtis Publishing Company, founded in 1891 by the publishing magnate, Cyrus Curtis (1850–1933). There, she was an honored guest, given a tour by no less a personage than George Horace Lorimer, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*. As she told Winifred,

Mr. Lorimer—the editor of the Curtis publications—has as his office a room which for beauty and spaciousness cannot have its equal in Europe—except in the Villa d’Este perhaps—and he took me over the printing presses—where they print 2,000,000 copies of the *Saturday Evening Post*—the perfectly imitative and second rate publication which is the best thing that is produced by all this magnificence. (West, *Letters* 70)

West’s harshly critical judgments suggest that she was not merely unimpressed by this display of both cultural and industrial power, but

contemptuous of Curtis's empire and its supposed achievements in the field of literature.

Nonetheless, five years later, West chose to sell a short story to the *Saturday Evening Post*, the first of several that she would offer to the magazine and to Lorimer, the same editor whom she had dismissed as "full of the terrible superficiality of the man who has never known anything but success" (West, *Letters* 70). Her motives were obviously financial, and she wrote fiction for the *Post* with a disagreeable sense of lowering both her standards and herself. Yet the unpleasant necessity of earning a living by catering to the demands of this American middlebrow mass-market weekly had a surprisingly happy result. For Lorimer, she composed the majority of the four long stories that eventually made up her 1935 volume, *The Harsh Voice*, thus giving her a new work to sell in Britain, too, through the publishing house of Jonathan Cape.

Why she might have regarded the *Saturday Evening Post* with disdain is clear from an examination of the 20 October 1928 issue, in which "Sideways," her first contribution to the magazine, appeared. The cover image for that issue was the height of kitsch: a comic rendering of a slice of small-town American life, known as *The Peacedale Corners Band Drummer*, executed by Alan Stephens Foster in the commercial art style made famous by J. C. Leyendecker and Norman Rockwell. Below the feet of the marchers were two lines of text listing the featured authors to be found within the magazine. As the only woman, West saw her name in the top line, surrounded by those of middlebrow male writers from Clarence Budington Kelland (creator of "Mr. Deeds," among other characters who became familiar through film adaptations of his work), to Frank Condon (known both as short-story writer and as author of celebrity profiles of Greta Garbo and Jean Harlow), to Remsen Crawford (a former editor of the *New York Herald*)—prolific spinners of light popular fiction and hardboiled newspapermen turned commentators and interviewers. This was hardly the company she was used to keeping in the pages of high-minded British political journals, such as Lady Rhondda's *Time and Tide*. But then again, as Jan Cohn reports in *Creating America: George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post* (1989), "By 1929, the Curtis Company net earnings were reported as \$21,534,265," and the *Post*'s circulation was so enormous that "Lorimer's salary was \$225,000" (Cohn 166). Even more important from West's perspective, in the late 1920s Lorimer could afford to offer writers such as Mary Roberts Rinehart \$4,000 for a single short story (Cohn 188).

Part of the key to the *Post*'s popularity was that it made much not only of its literary, but of its visual contents, and in doing so kept alive the nineteenth-century periodical tradition of illustrated stories. West was both familiar and comfortable with that tradition. In her work for British

illustrated magazines of the late 1920s and early 1930s, she enjoyed the benefit of seeing her writing paired with images by first-rate artists, whose reputations were equal to hers and whose styles were idiosyncratic and attention-getting. For its “*Modern ‘Rake’s Progress’*” series from February 1934 to January 1935, for example, the London-based *Nash’s Pall Mall Magazine* reunited West with the distinguished caricaturist David Low, who had also been her collaborator on *Lions and Lambs* in 1928. In contrast, George Lorimer, in his role as editor, assigned to her story for the *Post* one Henry Patrick Leigh (1880–1944), a mere journeyman illustrator. Whereas David Low’s images in the *Pall Mall* were well-suited to the political savvy and sophistication of West’s words (and vice versa), Leigh imposed on “Sideways” his own retrograde social stereotypes—for instance, dressing the fictional protagonist’s African American domestic servant, Mary, in a Mammy-like outfit with an apron at her waist and with a handkerchief tied around her head, a costume that was specified nowhere in the text itself. The *Post*, it seemed, either did not understand or chose not to acknowledge the unconventional elements of West’s story and did not think it worthwhile to engage a better visual collaborator to highlight them.

Still, Lorimer might be forgiven for having picked a second-tier artist for “Sideways.” If there was a generic look to Leigh’s illustrations, so too there was an air of unoriginality in West’s work, as though she were—to put matters bluntly—ripping off Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which had been such a hit a mere three years earlier, first for *Harper’s Bazaar* magazine and then for the publishing firm of Boni and Liveright, in its incarnation as a bestselling book. Recalling the ecstatic reception of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* for an essay titled “The Biography of a Book,” Loos herself had reported, with some surprise, that the “first edition was sold out on the day it reached bookshops and, although the second edition was of sixty thousand copies, it was exhausted almost as quickly” (Loos, “Biography” 9). Rebecca West appears to have taken note of the book’s phenomenal popularity and attempted none too subtly to mine the same vein. “This,” as West seemed to be saying, “is what you Americans like. Have some more of it.”

Many of the characters in “Sideways” have obvious prototypes in Loos’s comic novel. For the gold-digging showgirl Lorelei Lee, who travels from the provinces to New York City and tells outrageous lies about her past, West substituted Ruth Waterhouse, a professional dancer, whom the female narrator describes as “triumphantly acquisitive” (10). Like Lorelei, Ruth is a collector of men and, more important, of the expensive jewelry that they give her, as well as someone who fabricates and recasts her own history. For Lorelei’s African American maid Lulu, West substituted Ruth’s loyal servant, “who has gone everywhere with Ruth ever since she started on Broadway” (10). For Lorelei’s brash, witty, and straightforward friend Dorothy, an

observer who is unimpressed by pretentious spectacles, West substituted the nameless sharp-tongued narrator, who delights in describing a mural in an over-decorated French apartment as a depiction of "some dozen goddesses . . . offering bosoms the size of public libraries to the embraces of hundred-pound Cupids" (76). But for the wealthy, straight-laced, and easily bamboozled *über-WASP*, Henry H. Spoffard, whom Lorelei marries after convincing him that she has "finally got reformed" (Loos, *Gentlemen* 162), West substituted Issy Breitman, a most unexpected representative of old-fashioned virtues—of, moreover, precisely the sorts of virtues with which Curtis Publishing Company wished to associate itself.

As John Tebbel sums up the magazine's ideological stance in *George Horace Lorimer and the Saturday Evening Post* (1948), "Only one ironclad rule was imposed on every writer: there must never be an off-color situation, an indecent word or suggestion in a *Saturday Evening Post* story" (47). The Curtis Publishing Company's policy of emphasizing traditional "homely" values and, in particular, of promoting conventional images of femininity, extended even to the copy for the advertisements that appeared in its flagship weekly. The same 20 October 1928 issue of the *Post* with West's short story in it also contained, for example, General Electric's ad for Edison Mazda lightbulbs, which implicitly addressed a female homemaker sewing clothes for her little girl: "It's a pleasure to make her first party dress if the light is right. It's a torture if the light is bad. Be kind to your eyes" ("Edison" 70). So, too, an ad for Ivory Soap articulated explicitly the magazine's preferred vision of white American womanhood as domestic and, like the product itself, as "99 <sup>44/100</sup> % Pure": "After the wedding journey ends, the smooth white hands of the bride rule a new world—her own home, and its shining treasures. With so many charming things to care for, can her hands *keep* their loveliness? . . . 'Ivory for everything' will keep *your* hands white and smooth" (italics in original; "Ivory" 2).

Rebecca West followed the *Post*'s directive to avoid the "indecent" and to vaunt domestic virtues, but with a twist *sideways*, as it were: she made the embodiment of sentimentality, moral rectitude, propriety, mother-worship, love of home, and insistence upon female sexual purity a small, ugly, Jewish comic stage performer named Issy Breitman. Anita Loos may have led the way in having spoofed (hence, her play on the word with the name "Spoffard") the sort of WASP reader associated with Curtis's and Lorimer's values, but she had done so from the safety of publication in *Harper's Bazaar*, a magazine that was part of William Randolph Hearst's rival empire. West brought her satire directly into the belly of the beast, by turning the representative of the *Post*'s normative American middle-class ideals into the nephew of a rabbi, as well as into a professional entertainer from the *louche* world of Broadway—thus, making him the Puritan's doubly despised "Other." In doing so, she went much further than Loos, when it

came to walking the line between laughter and offense.

Although West's Issy Breitman achieves his success on the stage through slapstick comedy, he is all too serious about being "possessed by a deep and extremely vocal passion for the old-fashioned ideals of the home" and by a determination—announced as often as possible "to the press by article and by interview"—to "live as clean a life in the theater as in a minister's home." Such a figure was sure to be abhorrent to large swaths of the *Post's* middle-class Christian audience, for he mirrored their own beliefs in feminine purity, but mixed them with open devotion to Judaism. As the narrator reports, "Frequently he was photographed in company with his mother, the rabbi's sister, his arm usually stretched out towards her in a manner suggestive of a signpost . . . indicating to what pattern the lady who wished to be Mrs. Breitman must conform" (11).

In playing this game of baiting her readers and forcing them to question, if not to switch, their allegiance, West also displayed her own ambivalence about Jews. The complexity of her position on Jews would be evident throughout the rest of her literary career. While insisting often upon her unalloyed admiration for Jewish culture and while creating a number of sympathetic Jewish characters, especially in her post-Second-World-War fiction, West reproduced anti-Semitic stereotypes, especially when it came to Jewish men. Her portrait of Issy Breitman was no exception. Though filtered through the voice of a dramatized narrator from whom West herself could claim a self-protective distance, the description of this "low" comic nonetheless emphasized conventional racialized classifications, encouraging the *Post's* readers to acknowledge Jewish male difference and inferiority in terms of both psychology and physiology:

He was one of those Jews who consist entirely of convex curves that reflect the light. There are Jews who consist entirely of concave curves, who have deep pits round their eyes and under their cheekbones where melancholy lives, and hollow chests inhabited by coughs and lacerating racial memories; he was the exact opposite. From his round little hook nose and round little cheeks, from his chins, of which he already had three, from each of his short fat fingers and his hard, tight, raven-wing curls, there seemed to shoot forth rays of light and cheerfulness. (West, "Sideways" 72)

"Sideways" appeared only one year after another, far less conflicted, story about Jewish performers and their relationship to the mainstream—"The Third-Class Concert" by West's *Time and Tide* contemporary, Winifred Holtby (1898–1935). Like Rebecca West, Holtby was dependent upon her income from selling fiction, as well as essays and reviews, to popular

periodicals. Also like West in the 1920s, Holtby ascribed to social and political views that were far more radical than those of the mass audience to which she had to cater. Publishing her short story in the 11 June 1927 issue of the London-based and leftist-friendly *New Statesman*, however, allowed Holtby to critique the anti-Semitism of the average Christian reader more openly than she could have done in an American middlebrow magazine such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, while also displaying her own identification with even the most stigmatized categories of Jews.

"The Third-Class Concert" (later collected in Holtby's 1934 volume, *Truth Is Not Sober*) contained a scathing Depression-era portrait of newly poor Britons traveling third-class for financial reasons, yet keeping themselves aloof from the company of the "dark, despised . . . Jews from Eastern Europe" who are their shipmates on a voyage to South Africa. These English travelers prove not merely narrow-minded and snobbishly determined to go on "keeping themselves to themselves," but utterly untalented and inartistic (Holtby 100). Attempting to amuse themselves on the long voyage, they get up a series of concerts that merely expose their inferiority to the so-called "pestilential Jews" (101), who prove to be masters of song and, especially, of dance: "As David might have danced before the Ark of the Covenant, with the triumphant solemnity of a Chosen People . . . they danced before the wondering Gentiles" (104). Identifying throughout the narrative with these "suffering" Jewish artist-figures, and finding in their gifts "something real and vivid and glowing," is the figure at the story's moral center, a British journalist whose "forefathers, also, long ago, had been Jews" and whose admiration for these gifted performers points the reader to where the author's own sympathies lie (105). "The Third-Class Concert" becomes, by the end, an exercise in philo-Semitism and an overt rejection of the values of the "lordly English" (106).

In "Sideways," we might expect West's fictional surrogate throughout to be the dramatized narrator, a sophisticated non-Jewish Englishwoman who travels between New York and the Continent while working as a political journalist. (As this professional commentator says casually, at one point, "[My] paper ordered me off to Geneva to sit and watch the League of Nations for a bit" (72).) Often, this figure does function as the medium for West's comic voice, particularly when poking fun at men's puritanical and misogynist denunciations of "modern" women—of those "girls who rouge their stockings and roll their lips and powder their cocktails—I may have got this a bit mixed, but one has heard that kind of diatribe so often that one can't keep one's mind on it as one used to" (11).

Quite surprisingly, however, it is instead with the glamorous Jewish dancer, Ruth Waterhouse, that West shares more important characteristics—a fact signaled, perhaps, by the "R. W." initials they have in common. Among their resemblances is a common history of emotional

damage at the hands of excitingly dangerous male lovers that makes them turn at last to unappealing men who are husband-material. As the narrator notes shrewdly,

[A] woman of twenty-six does not marry a man whose sole recommendation is that he would be kind to his wife unless she has had some rather scarring experiences of men who are not good to women. I also seemed to remember that I had heard of Ruth's having been seen about with some man whose charm for women and brutality towards them were well known. (72)

Clearly, what was true for a woman of twenty-six was equally applicable to one of thirty-six, Rebecca West's own age, for 1928, the year of the composition of "Sideways," was also when West met Henry Andrews, the "partly Jewish" banker whom she would describe as "rather like a dull giraffe, sweet, kind and loving" and whom she would marry in 1930 (Glendinning 137, 131).

If Issy Breitman, the observant Jewish male performer who demands moral rectitude in a wife, is an unattractive figure, Ruth Waterhouse, the non-observant American Jewish woman, proves just the opposite. Indeed, she is so beautiful and magnetic that the British female narrator's comments on her as "looking as lovely as the dreams you can't quite remember," with skin "blanched by moonlight," begin to sound almost quasi-lesbian in tone (10–11). As Rebecca West in effect divides herself, however, between the worshipful narrator and the seductive Jewish performer, the former character's tributes to Ruth serve instead as an exercise in self-regard.

West's identification with the professional dancer grows as this protagonist increasingly displays "something steely" behind her perpetual "stillness" and her deployment of evasiveness—something that drives her to plot a clever way to rid herself of the jewels from former lovers that might arouse her straight-laced bridegroom's suspicions (78). In her dealings with men and women alike, Ruth's method is always, as the narrator notes, to rely on indirection: "I cannot tell you how pervasive of every department of life her indirectness was" (10). Ruth is, moreover, a stager of scenes and a creator of fictions—in effect, both an actress and an author. Thus, her career path mirrors that of West herself, who had trained to be an actress, before turning instead to the writing of novels, political essays, and literary criticism.

Throughout this short story, Rebecca West herself is, in fact, just as indirect, elusive, and manipulative as Ruth herself. She, too, plays a double game—at once bowing to the conservative strictures of the Curtis Publishing Company by producing the tale of a woman performer who gives up her loose way of life to marry a man devoted to domesticity and to acquiring a

wife with a spotless reputation, yet laughing pointedly at those values by making their spokesman a Jewish male "grotesque" and then watching him be tricked (11). West took George Horace Lorimer's money gladly. Yet, as the narrator remarks, while describing how Ruth conducted her love affairs before her marriage, just when the "rich and important men . . . might have thought they had caught her, they hadn't" (10). Like Ruth, her creator proved adept at demonstrating that anyone who tried to contain her was "not really holding her; at any moment she might slip away from him, from the crowd, from the world," and this "gave her . . . [a] peculiar power over men" (10).

At the same time, West turned the commercial bargain that she made with the *Post* to her own purposes, for "Sideways" proved an important moment in the evolution of West's notions of feminism and of women's relationship with power. In earlier fiction, such as *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), West had championed the straightforwardness of Margaret Grey, who insists that "The truth's the truth," against the underhanded machinations of Kitty Baldry, the ultra-feminine womanly woman (West, *Return* 184). For her unfinished novel of the mid-1920s, *Sunflower*, she had created a protagonist who, despite earning her living as an actress, refuses to exercise any wiles or engage in pretense in her private life, and who suffers for her integrity, but remains as admirable as she is honest. With "Sideways," however, West began to explore a different kind of feminist heroine. As she would do again one year later, in her story "Elegy" for the fundraising project called *The Legion Book*, West portrayed sympathetically a woman who schemes to deceive the men around her, out of a laudable desire to protect and preserve the lives of the helpless. The nameless heroine of "Elegy," known only by the iconic designation of "Mother," finds a way to save a poor handyman's family with a deliberate lie. Similarly, an expectant mother—the beautiful Isabelle of West's 1936 novel, *The Thinking Reed*—summons up her dramatic skills to play the role of a hysterically jealous woman, in order to draw her gambling-addict husband away from the casino where he is about to rack up a catastrophic loss that will ruin them financially. In the case of "Sideways," Ruth Waterhouse's most ambitious deception occurs once she, too, is pregnant and must ensure her husband's continued commitment to their marriage, which she does by staging a scene that enables her to dispose of the jewels that fuel his doubts about her past.

Driven to subterfuge herself while writing for a magazine unfriendly to her aesthetic and political principles, Rebecca West found a way both to satisfy the demand that she celebrate wholesome American values and to send them up. Her challenge was to appease the editor of a periodical that affirmed the existence of "an unreal world where romance and morality clasped hands on an equally high plane, where the happy ending and the good clean American life were the prerequisites" (Tebbel 49), while knowing

full well—as she was later to demonstrate in her collaboration with the illustrator David Low, *The Modern 'Rake's Progress'* (1934)—that a clear-eyed appreciation of “the malice of the times” was more useful than such vacuous optimism (West and Low, *Modern* 127). To reconcile the conflict between the marketplace and her own integrity, she wrote a “sideways” story and, in the process, developed a new “sideways” heroine, even as she demonstrated to her British modernist contemporaries the possibility of working productively within the constraints of middlebrow fiction.

Interestingly, she did so at the precise moment when, in 1928, Virginia Woolf published *Orlando: A Biography*, about an Elizabethan nobleman who lives forever, but turns into a woman along the way. As a woman, Woolf's eponymous hero/heroine discovers new sources of enjoyment and new kinds of power, while recognizing that he/she must access these through indirect means: “Candid by nature, and averse to all kinds of equivocation, to tell lies bored her. It seemed to her a roundabout way of going to work. Yet, she reflected, the flowered paduasoy—the pleasure of being rescued by a blue-jacket—if these were only to be obtained by roundabout ways, roundabout one must go, she supposed” (Woolf 76). Woolf's fantastic tale celebrated her love affair with Vita Sackville-West, a relationship to which she had to allude carefully, in a sideways fashion, lest her work meet the same fate—in the very same year—as that other, far more “candid” representation of lesbian love, *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). Radclyffe Hall's novel, which engaged in no such subterfuge, was declared obscene by a judge and banned from being sold in Britain. Thus, Woolf's articulation of Orlando's practice was also the artist's revelation of her own strategic decision about how best to operate within a climate of moral censorship. The example of West's profitable partnership with the *Saturday Evening Post*—not only with “Sideways” in October 1928, but with “There Is No Conversation” in December of the same year, and with “Life Sentence” in 1930—stood as confirmation of the wisdom of offering radical content in a seemingly unobjectionable guise, a practice that resulted five years later in the writing of Woolf's *Flush*.

For quite different reasons, West came to the same conclusion in 1928 as Woolf did in *Orlando*, about the need for women to go “roundabout,” but chose to apply this principle far more broadly and to present it as a life-affirming move, required to counter the destructive impulses associated with patriarchy. She continued to do so, moreover, throughout the many decades of her career that followed. In Ruth Waterhouse's plot to keep her unborn child safe by hoodwinking her husband, we find the germ of West's portrayals of a number of later protagonists, culminating in the saintly Clare Aubrey of *The Fountain Overflows* (1956), who lies to her profligate husband about the value of the paintings that hang in their house, in order to save her family from destitution. What Ann V. Norton rightly labels the

"purity of Clare's vision," at least when it comes to her musical pursuits (68), becomes something less pure and more problematically shifty, as Clare maintains over the entire course of her marriage a deception that puts the welfare of her children above any duty to be honest with her husband. As Carl Rollyson has noted, Clare is "a physical and mental ringer for Isabella Fairfield," West's own mother, who was torn between her devotion to truth as a core value in her musicianship and her love for a husband whose neglectful and financially careless behavior required her to lie, whether to creditors or to family members or to Charles Fairfield himself. Like the woman on whom she was based, West's Clare remains "committed" to "the life of art," dedicating herself wholeheartedly to the principles of clarity and honesty in her role as a pianist (Rollyson 195–96). But she is equally committed to the *art of life*, and this dedication leads her, like Ruth Waterhouse, to seek a sideways route, rather than to deal straightforwardly with the man who has power over her children's fate.

In West's 1928 story, moreover, we also see the germ of the eponymous heroine of "Parthenope" (1959), a much later work of short fiction for the American market, although this time for the sophisticated *New Yorker* magazine audience. Believing that she has to get them "away from their husbands," Parthenope rescues and protects from harm her mentally disabled sisters (West, "Parthenope" 70). To accomplish this end, she must fake their deaths through a staged highway robbery, thus freeing them from their abusive marriages and enabling them to live out their lives in peace and security. Parthenope defends this theatrical feat—a complex one that descends from the simpler scenario concocted by Ruth Waterhouse to convince Issy Breitman that she was always a virtuous maiden, and that the child she is carrying must be his—by asserting that love "can work miracles, but not all the miracles that are required before life can be tolerable" (80). These other miracles require a woman who is willing and able, as she says, to "plot and lie, and lie and plot" (77).

Making life "tolerable" for herself and for her son Anthony was uppermost in Rebecca West's mind during 1928, when she wrote the first of several short stories for George Horace Lorimer and entered into a lucrative association with the middlebrow weekly that he edited. To "plot" was, of course, the usual sort of activity in which a professional author engaged, while moving ahead in the literary world. Earlier, though, West had endorsed for her fictional female protagonists, at least, the possibility of achieving worthy ends through openness and honesty—a fantasy she eventually abandoned. "Winning gloriously" required instead a slantwise approach (West, "Sideways" 10); even more, achieving safety for oneself and others in the face of masculine power depended upon the capacity both to "plot" and to "lie." The creation of Ruth Waterhouse proved a *sideways* turn for West, but perhaps an inevitable one for a writer who came to understand that

power ultimately belonged not to the richest man or to the most beautiful woman, but to the best storyteller.

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